

“Peace of Christ”

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First Presbyterian Church
October 5, 2014

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 2:11-15

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 11:5-9

The Rev. Lala (Rasendrasahina) Ha-sen-draw-shina of Madagascar preached in Parkville at the Presbytery meeting this past Tuesday. A Presbytery meeting is the gathering of PC(USA) churches throughout the Heartland region. In addition to hearing reports and voting on Presbytery business, we always have a worship service, including communion.

And since the Rev. Ha-sen-draw-shina is a Presbyterian pastor who was visiting last week from the Eastern Africa country of Madagascar, he was invited to preach. Among his duties is to be an International Peacemaker.

During his sermon, Rev. Lala (as I like to call him after my last two attempts at pronouncing his last - Ha-sen-draw-shina – the spelling is scarier than my pronunciation) – anyway, Rev. Lala made the point during his sermon that there is no peace without reconciliation.

There is no peace without reconciliation. No wonder we live in a world of conflict and division; reconciliation takes work! It takes risking vulnerability at the hands of those who act out against us. It takes ... more than we can seem to muster, at least for any extended period of time.

And yet, we read in Ephesians that peace comes from setting aside our sense of hopelessness, our confusion about how and why God does things, our striving to do it our way, and all the **hostility and division that this creates**. True peace means setting all this aside and taking up Christ as our one, true Savior, the source of our peace, and peace the world over. “In Christ Jesus,” says Ephesians, “you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has ... broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.” Now that is reconciliation. That is true peace.

But is that what we have in this world or do we see something else? When we look into the soul of our society – the soul of humanity – do we find Christ reflected back, Christ’s peace?

Ephesians says, “Remember that you were at (one) time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel (which means separated from God), and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.”

That, to me, sounds like the opposite of peace. Cut off from God, not knowing the promises of the Lord, having no hope, no God – that’s what it’s like to live in a world without peace, a world in which, try as we might, we can’t even seem to get a glimpse of true peace.

And yet here we have it – right here in Ephesians chapter 2 – the picture of true peace. It’s a picture of a single person, and more than a person! It’s a picture of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the crucified and risen Savior. Let’s not go messing with that picture. It’s perfect just the way it is; no photo shopping; no editing to dress it all up. Just the cross of Jesus, the blood of Christ – that’s the source of true peace.

But we have trouble looking at the cross in that way. We have trouble with the simple message it conveys: Christ and Christ alone. When it comes to achieving peace or anything else in this world, we want to get in the picture. We want to photo bomb Jesus! Be the center of it all. And that’s when the picture of peace as God has established it gets a little blurry for us. All of a sudden, it’s not all about Jesus. It becomes more about us – about what we want and what we can accomplish, no help needed, thank you very much. And just like that, Jesus drops right out of the picture, right out of view and so does the source of true peace.

So what does true peace look like in this world today, in the world as we encounter it, with all the turmoil and upset and confrontation and war and disasters that seem to hit someone, somewhere everyday?!?

Well, it looks something like this: Tim Riter in his book “Deep Down” describes an art competition that awarded a prize for the best expression of peace.¹ One painting showed a deer and a fawn grazing near the bottom of a mountain that was rimmed with pines and cedars stretching to the heavens. Another showed a cat curled up in a basket, resting with all its being, as only cats can do. But the first prize went to the painting of a noise, turbulent waterfall. White water rushing downward, crashing on the rocks below, sending spray high into the air above. And there, just above the mist, is a single tree limb, with a bird's nest in its branches. And safely within the nest, is a mother bird and her two little babies. That’s peace. ***The ability to relax amid the most hectic and uncertain circumstances.***

Calm surroundings don’t produce peace. Neither does the absence of discord and division. If peace depended on what was going on around us, we would never find it. True peace is being in harmony with the world around us, no matter what that world looks like or feels like. True peace is turning it all over to Jesus and allowing God the Father to fit it all together into a divine expression of Christ’s peace.

As we receive the Sacrament the Lord’s Supper today – in communion with Christians the world over – let us do so in the peace of Christ. “In his flesh,” says Ephesians – in his vulnerable, sometimes turbulent, always peaceful, and ever

¹ Tim Riter, *Deep Down* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995), 72.

self-giving flesh – Christ “has made both groups (that is all divisions) into one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is (to say) the hostility, between us.”

All those things that divide us – politics, ethnicity, nationality, religion, wealth and poverty, sex and gender, age and health, type-A personalities, optimists and pessimists, introverts and extroverts, generations X, Y and Z – everything that divides us gets set aside at the foot of the cross, at the Table of the Lord. And this is not our doing, but God’s. So let’s not in foolishness or presumption wipe out all that God is accomplishing through Jesus Christ.

When hostility or division or “my way” or the highway takes hold of you – or of me – we have someplace safe and reassuring to turn to. And that place is the Wondrous Cross, where, as the hymn says, sorrow and love flowed mingled down.

We couldn’t create such a picture of peace if we tried, and in fact we did – we do try. But the more we try to make things look how we like them – which is usually a lot more like us than anything resembling Christ or Christ’s peace – the more we try to color the world to suit our tastes, the more hostility and division arises. And the only saving grace of all of this is God and the way God sees things.

God knows we have this tendency to take over where we’re not needed, to manipulate things to our liking. So God gives us an expression of peace for us to relate to. God gives us Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. And not as a conqueror does Christ come to us, but as a suffering servant.

Jesus Christ, the son of God, given for you and for me, that we might know and experience and embrace, **true peace** – Christ’s peace.

I have a picture of Christ’s peace for each and every one of you here today – and enough for you to take one or two to friends or family. If the ushers would please pass out the gift, this representation of Christ’s peace, I would invite you to take that with you into the world. A picture of the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem taken by a ministry colleague of mine. It showed up on my Facebook newsfeed the morning I sat down to write this sermon called the **Peace of Christ**. I downloaded the picture to my computer and formatted it into a bookmark for you, or you can put it on your bathroom mirror or in your car.

Let it be a reminder for all of us, that when we find ourselves struggling for a sense of true peace, we have but one place to turn. The cross of Jesus, in which God has accomplished all things to God’s good pleasure. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We come as many people, O God, yet gather as one people in this place of prayer.

Some of us come with hearts bursting with joy as when a baby's tiny fingers curl around our own.

Some of us come in the delight of having gathered with family members in summertime reunions, while others of us mourn the loss of loved ones.

We come relieved at the results of medical tests – or anxious as we wait. We come to you beaming with joy at the magnificence of the sunrise – and others under the heavy cloud of the day or week that awaits us.

However we come, gracious God, and wherever we are: You are there. All of our moments are your moments.

Please, help us to remember this, as we pray the prayer taught by the prince of peace, Jesus the Christ, lifting our hearts and voices together as we sing:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**